

South Korea and NATO: A push for deepening of cooperation

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Cooperative relations between South Korea and NATO intensified in 2005 when Ban Ki-moon, then Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea, addressed the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Brussels. Ban called for a deeper and more meaningful cooperation between NATO and South Korea. At the NATO Bucharest Summit of 2008, the alliance introduced the Tailored Cooperation Packages (TCP), which South Korea signed in 2012 and renewed in 2017, in the form of an Individual Cooperation Programme (ICCP). Henceforth, as the current NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg notes, the cooperation between NATO and the ROK “has ranged from Afghanistan to Somalia, and from science to cyberspace”. The ICCP between the ROK and NATO focuses mainly on military concerns.

South Korea can deepen its cooperation with NATO in order to diversify its security partners, beyond its historical ally, the United States. Cooperation with NATO would give South Korea access to the expertise and resources of 28 countries in addition to the United States. In the future, South Korea through its partnership with NATO could start curbing its cooperation with the US on hard military matters, and could also attain more autonomy in the long run.

The security of the Korean Peninsula is very much interconnected with Chinese, American and Russian influences in the region. The United States is a protector of the ROK’s security. China exercises its influence in the region and, given its position as ROK’s first trading partner (USD 149bn, 25% of South Korea’s total exports in 2018), has strong

The Republic of Korea and NATO have had an Individual Cooperation Programme (ICCP) in place since 2012 which mainly focuses on security. It is a relationship in an environment where competing great powers, the United States, China, and Russia, are attempting to cast a sphere of influence in East Asia. The ROK is carefully navigating these competing diplomatic spats during a time where the threat of a nuclear North Korea is ever more dangerous. This policy brief recommends that the ROK should deepen its relationship with NATO due to the benefits both parties could offer each other. This includes having a strategic ally in the Northeast Asian region and the backing of and access to resources of the 29 members of the military alliance.

leverage over Seoul. Russia has been staunchly supporting the Chinese approach to the DPRK nuclear issue, while advocating a possible withdrawal of US troops combined with the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. South Korea aims to maintain amicable relations with these neighbours. Therefore, Seoul, via its middle power diplomacy, has been practicing a hedging strategy in its foreign relations.

Cooperation with NATO brings a number of benefits to South Korea. Seoul’s strategic focus is on Northeast Asian security, but NATO provides an excellent channel

for diplomacy with western states regarding North Korea. South Korea advocates for tactical nuclear weapons deployment, a minority in the country, see NATO as an example. For South Korea's foreign and defence policy outside Northeast Asia, NATO's experience with peacekeeping operations and other multilateral activities is also a valuable asset.

ROK-NATO cooperation requires interest on the part of NATO as well. NATO will need to reach a broader consensus about the relevance of Asian security issues for its own objectives while also keeping in mind the differences among Asian security partners. Given the prominence of the North Korean nuclear and missile issues for the United States, NATO should consider pushing the ROK-NATO IPCP in a direction that deepens their cooperation on North Korea's denuclearisation.

Regular talks between Seoul and NATO on Asian security would give all sides a deeper grasp of the emerging security challenges within the region and their implications for Europe. From Seoul's perspective, it would also be an opportunity to influence the Northeast Asia policy of major western powers. Constructive dialogue through summits on security or political matters and consultations on information-sharing and lessons learned, on a regular basis, would deepen the partnership and their commitment to each other.

Through the framework of the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII), launched in 2014 at the Wales Summit, South Korea could aim for an ambitious, complex, and more tailor-made relationship. This could provide South Korea with enhanced access to interoperability, which can reduce the necessity of ROK-US joint military exercises. This would bring the possibility for South Korea to exercise concomitantly with other NATO members, instead of cooperating only bilaterally on military matters with the US.

South Korea should engage with NATO more deeply in order to strengthen their cooperation in many

issues covered by the Science for Peace and Security (SPS) framework, namely; counter-terrorism, energy security, cyber defence, defence against CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear) agents, environmental security, security-related advanced technology, border and port security, and human and social aspects of security. South Korea should pay special attention to cyber security already covered by the SPS. Seoul should enhance cooperation by deepening and expanding the level of cooperation and investments already started through the 2015 multi-year project regarding the need to maintain confidentiality and integrity in data processing, set to accelerate the adoption of big data and cloud computing technologies in the defence sector. This specific project could be used to regularise consultations on best practices to prevent or react to contingencies, adapt to innovations, and establish systematic exchange of qualified personnel between South Korea and NATO.

In conclusion, the IPCP between the ROK and NATO is stable and ongoing. This has allowed South Korea to participate in interoperability platforms with members of the alliance in the field of standardisation and logistics. Not only has South Korea benefited from NATO's resources, but the latter has also made use of the partnership. South Korea has helped NATO in Afghanistan by helping with civilian-military reconstruction projects focusing on health, financial assistance, education, rural development and governance. They have also cooperated with countering the threat of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), denuclearisation of the Korea Peninsula (included in the IPCP objectives for cooperation) and the improvement of cyber security.

With everything said, the relations between South Korea and NATO could be further developed through the use of existing cooperation frameworks of cooperation and the continuous commitment to shared interests and exchange of best practices and skilled personnel.

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